

SUMMARY

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The young fathers project

**A project to develop and evaluate a model
of working with young vulnerable fathers**

Background and aims

- ◆ This report is a summary of an evaluation of TSA's Young Fathers Project (2002-2004).
- ◆ The project was initiated by the (then) Home Office's Family Policy Unit (now incorporated within the Children and Families Directorate, Department for Education and Skills (DfES)).
- ◆ Ministers and officers were concerned about high levels of teenage pregnancy in England and the lack of services to support young fathers. The project was influenced by research that showed how children benefit if their fathers are actively involved in their lives in positive ways.
- ◆ The Trust for the Study of Adolescence was commissioned to co-ordinate a project (2002-2004) that developed, tested and evaluated a model of working with young vulnerable fathers. The intention was to learn lessons that would enable others to develop work with young fathers.



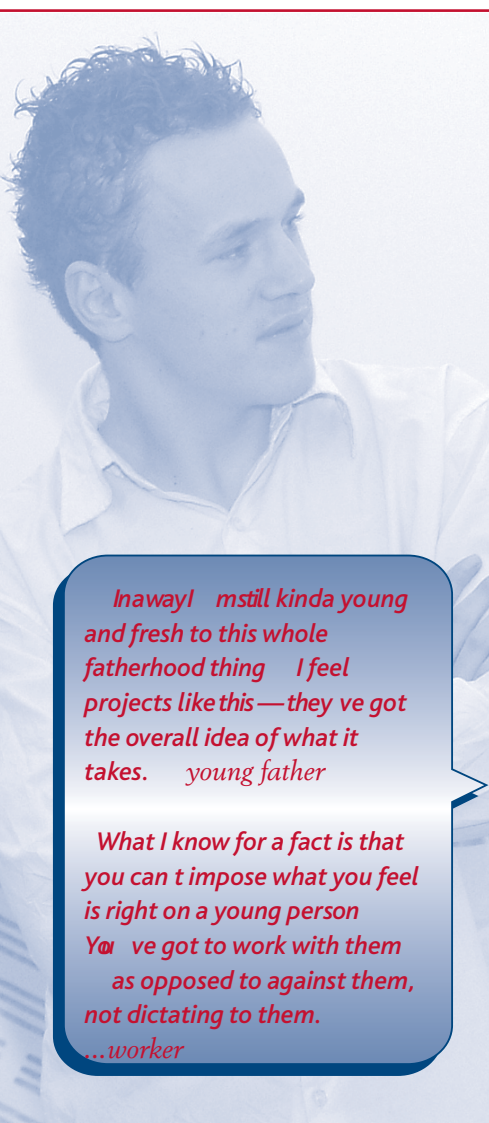
The role of fathers is being questioned within society as a whole. This project took place in a context where young fathers, possibly more than even young mothers, are marginalised and demonised. Research has shown that if young fathers drift out of touch with their children early on, there is a strong chance that they will not develop an involved relationship with their child.

The project aimed to help young fathers strengthen their relationships with their children by exploring their own attitudes as men and fathers and developing life skills and child care skills.

Five different voluntary organisations managed the project sites (Birmingham, London, Newcastle, Norwich and Sheffield). Each site was expected to work with over 50 young fathers aged under 25, more than 15 (30%) of whom would be teenagers. The model for working with young fathers consisted of the following elements:

- ◆ vigorous outreach including developing links with key local organisations both as a source for referrals and of services for the young men
- ◆ one-to-one work
- ◆ semi-structured group work
- ◆ peer support
- ◆ an educational role with fellow professionals aimed at improving local services for young fathers

What the project involved



The voluntary organisations that managed the project sites were:

Birmingham	- ContinYou
London	- National Newpin (now part of Family Welfare Association)
Newcastle	- Fathers Plus, Children North East
Norwich	- Mancroft Advice Project (MAP)
Sheffield	- Father Figures, NACRO

Inevitably, each site developed its own particular flavour and emphasis, responding to local circumstances and reflecting workers' experience and skills. The London and Sheffield sites worked with fathers from a range of ethnic backgrounds. While Birmingham focused on African-Caribbean fathers, both Norwich and Newcastle worked almost exclusively with white English fathers.

At all the sites, over 90% of the fathers were unmarried, with around 40% living in council property and 20% with parents, except in Birmingham where nearly 40% were living with their parents. The proportion living apart from their children differed between sites with 13% in Newcastle, about 50% in London and Birmingham and around 70% in Sheffield and Norwich.

The reasons the fathers were in touch with the projects inevitably reflected their different circumstances. For example, in Newcastle, where a higher proportion were living with their children, the main reasons for contact were 'wanting to learn more about being a dad', 'help with housing' and 'accessing services'. In Norwich and Sheffield, where higher proportions were apart from their children, 'wanting to see their children more' and 'legal information' figured more. In Norwich around a third were recorded as 'wanting to improve relations with the child's mother'.

The **Birmingham** site built upon the worker's local standing as a well respected member of the African-Caribbean community with credibility 'on the street'. This enabled him to work with fathers from members of two opposing gangs. Informal

Inaway! I'm still kinda young and fresh to this whole fatherhood thing. I feel projects like this — they've got the overall idea of what it takes. young father

What I know for a fact is that you can't impose what you feel is right on a young person. You've got to work with them as opposed to against them, not dictating to them.

...worker

discussion groups, cooking and peer support were a feature of this site's work. One of the fathers increasingly took a lead to draw new dads into the group. In this site the work focused as much on working with men as on fatherhood per se and involved the fathers' children more than the other sites.

In **London** the emphasis was more on one-to-one work, taking as the starting point the issues the fathers wanted help with. For some fathers this meant helping them to re-establish contact with their children. The London site built up effective relationships with a range of local organisations, enabling the fathers to access a wider range of support. The project's good reputation meant that fathers using the service recommended it to others and take-up increased through word-of-mouth.

"... it's less kind of rigid ... I'm more likely to disclose certain things, you know, personal things maybe just to one person rather than seven people." young father

The **Newcastle** young fathers project benefited from being part of a wider fathers project that was located within a service to children and families (Children North East). The worker's experience as a detached youth worker and Sure Start Plus co-ordinator enabled her to engage with young men with a wide range of needs such as drug and alcohol problems and also to carry out work with couples.

In **Norwich** the project was part of a well-established advice service for young people. Young fathers who had approached the centre for advice could be referred to the young fathers' project worker for additional 'father specific' support, and back-up was available in terms of a range of areas of specialist advice if needed.

"When I first came to MAP it wasn't for the initial idea of coming to the fathers' group. I think it was some issues with housing and ... I queried about the fathers' group. I was just asking and the lady I was talking to brought me to ... (the project worker) ... and that's it. I've been coming ever since." young father

Group work was a high priority in Norwich and much valued by those who attended (though numbers at the sessions were low). The site learned much from a separate TSA evaluation of its group work.

"Everyone interacts, you get better answers." young father

The project site in **Sheffield** was also part of a wider service to fathers of all ages. Consequently the site placed significant emphasis on developing a local infrastructure for supporting fathers. Group work was also a priority, and like in Norwich, the project struggled to establish a viable young fathers' group. The worker's background as a drama therapist also shaped the project's direction and culminated in a video made in conjunction with the local youth offending team (yot), featuring five young fathers and completed shortly after the TSA project ended.

In four of the sites the lead worker was male, in one site, female. Some of the male workers also worked with female colleagues.

"Getting off my drink and drugs was through ... (the worker) ... a lot of the major changes in my life have been in one way or another associated with (her). She's been a great help"
...young father

The evaluation

"I don't think he sees it as a distant fathering role ... He doesn't want to be the sort of father his father was. I think that is very definite; he does want to be more involved and more caring." probation officer

The evaluation examined the planning, delivery and impact of the project. It aimed to highlight lessons that would benefit others doing similar work.

The material for the evaluation was drawn from repeat interviews with 18 key stakeholders: site workers, managers, TSA national project manager, trainer (Fathers Direct) and government officials plus 26 young fathers drawn from all the sites. The evaluation also drew upon observation of the sites, written reports and material from all site meetings and a residential training event.

The fathers were aged between 18 and 27. Ten of the young men and most of the stakeholders were interviewed twice at intervals of seven to twenty months. The repeat interviews provided some sense of change during the project's relatively short lifetime.



The evaluation

About half of the fathers interviewed were living with some of their children. There were also single interviews with three professionals connected to two of the young fathers. This information provided further insight into the impact of the young fathers' project on the young men. A solicitor for one of the London fathers made the point that clients referred from the project were:

"...far more clued up than some of the people we have who are coming in off the street because they're just unaware what their rights are and what their options are. ... (The project leader was) able to explain in every day language the sorts of options open to him but without saying - this is what you need to do. In terms of having a person there with the skills to be able to engage ... (our client) and to have some sort of trust from him, ... [the project leader] has done really well. For us their work is absolutely brilliant." solicitor

What we found



Numbers

"I wouldn't ... shout it from the rooftops ... I would say that it had been more successful than I thought it would but there's still always plenty room for improvement." worker

All the sites found it difficult to attract fathers in large numbers, though this improved over time. The five sites recorded having worked with 231 fathers in the two-year period. The number per site varied from 27 to 62. However, recordkeeping was patchy and definitions of 'worked with' varied. For example one of the sites that recorded having worked with 62 young fathers noted that of these 17 had only been seen once. Where information was available it showed that across the sites just over a quarter of the fathers were seen more than eleven times by the project workers.

Data about age was also incomplete. It suggested that around a quarter of the fathers were teenagers. The project's target had been 30%. About 14% were between 15 and 17 years old.



Location

The location of the project was important. Welcoming venues at the centre of the communities they aim to serve are best: increasing the likelihood that young fathers will turn up. Only the Norwich site operated from the same base throughout the project's two years. This venue also had the benefit of being 'young people friendly', with other services on site. The other projects struggled with problems such as insufficient space, inhospitable locations or venues that had been geared more to female clients. The Birmingham project has to grapple with 'turf' issues related to local gangs and delivered its work from two different sites at one point.



The wider organisation

The host organisations had a significant impact on the individual projects. Some workers had excellent facilities with good support from managers and colleagues. Others felt that they had to deal with ambivalence about the nature of their work, inadequate professional supervision and/or major organisational instability.



Fathers workers

"...its all about relating, innit? Anyone can have a personality" ...young father

The skills, attitudes and knowledge of workers were crucial for the success of the work. Staff needed to be proactive in setting up initial contacts with referral agencies, determined to contact potential young fathers and constantly patient to keep in touch.

This is demanding work that requires a breadth of skills including an ability to relate to young men and work with them one-to-one and in groups. It was also important to be able to recognise and accept each young man's stage of development and to work with it. Successful staff also require political sensitivity to be able to challenge discrimination (towards young fathers and by them) yet at the same time, win over sceptics and make allies locally. In the main, the young fathers did not care too much about the age, sex or ethnicity of their worker. What mattered was whether the person related well.



Variations

The five sites approached the work differently. For example, some offered advice on housing and benefit claims, while one did not see such services as falling within its remit. In considering what to offer, sites drew the boundaries differently from each other with one site conducting some work with couples rather than the young man exclusively. More fundamentally, the different approaches reflected underlying core beliefs about the purpose of the project. Some sites understood the purpose of their work to be therapeutic, some place greater emphasis on the education and social aspects of their work.

But where a site encompassed a mixed approach combining basic information, support and advice with the exploration of issues and attitudes connected to fatherhood they were able to attract and work with greater numbers of young men and also to develop beyond one-to-one work into both group work and peer support.



Group work

A specific evaluation of the group work in Norwich identified key factors that helped explain some of the difficulties involved in maintaining group work. For example, the need to have sufficient fathers in the pool that the group will be drawn from, recognising that some will never take up the offer of group work; acknowledging the disruptive consequences of 'open' groups where new members can join at any time and the difficulties in finding common ground when fathers' circumstances are very different. For example fathers looking for support with child care skills had very different needs from young men who were estranged from their children and wanted to re-establish contact.

There appears to be a dearth of material to support direct work (especially group work) with young fathers. Although some project workers found some aspects of an American manual (NPCL) valuable, others were alienated by its size and felt it did not address the UK context, nor particular issues relevant to black and Asian young fathers.




Common ground

Although the sites approached their work in different ways, a common thread was the need to adopt a steady, planned approach. When workers achieved success it was often the result of being dogged and sticking at what they were doing and being there for the young men.

Because of the age of these young fathers, the approaches that were the most successful drew on those of youth workers. It is possible, therefore, to look at this project and think that it is a youth work project. And in a sense it was, but with one fundamental difference – the well-being of the children of these young men was at the centre of everything.

Impact on other professionals



One of the aims of the fathers' project was to make an impact on fellow professionals. All the sites saw this aspect of the brief as important and some were more successful than others in engaging with and influencing key local agencies. All the sites commented that the project's limited staff time and the short duration (two years) restricted what could be achieved in this area.

"... most professionals in health and care are women, and women have difficulties with groups of men, quite often ... I think there's an attitude that their job is about supporting the girl through the pregnancy and childbirth ... the attitude of fear and trepidation underpins that, so that the boys get a rough deal." site manager

Project workers also came face-to-face with the marginalisation of young fathers and even outright resistance to their work.

Outcomes for fathers, children and mothers

"... (the) sessions that we had talking about role models did really (have an effect) because I know I had to sort my life out and I had to take responsibility ..." young father

By interviewing fathers at different points in the project's two years it was possible to identify change. The focus was on four central aspects of their lives: involvement with their children, relationship with the child's mother and extended family, living arrangements and personal development.

"My housing was thanks to ... (the worker). Coming off me depression and working through my problems was through the worker." young father

Although it would be reasonable to expect the fathers to experience positive changes in the normal course of events without any involvement of this project, many fathers identified ways in which the project had helped them.

More involvement in their children's lives

"... it's fun when we were just messing around like that (play fighting). It's different to see them happy, because sometimes they'd put on a front with me and pretend they're really good. But now they're relaxed, playing and they'll talk - about favourite foods, favourite clothes, favourite games..." young father

A number of the fathers talked about how the project had directly helped them become more involved with their children. One non-resident young father reported that he had stopped arguing with his child's mother about school arrangements and had now developed good relationships with his daughter's teachers, enabling him to be informed of her progress.

Some non-resident young fathers had learned how to be patient with their children. For one of the fathers in Birmingham this had led to him playing more with his children, in turn they were laughing more and were more open with him.

A young dad in Newcastle reported that through his involvement with the project his relationship with his daughter had developed into a new area as he was now doing much of the childcare. He said:

"Yes, that's the way modern life is now; women go out to work and the men do the caring, the cleaning. It's only fair, my partner is bringing in the money, so I do my fair share."

Relationship with child's mother and family

Regardless of the nature of the existing relationship between the young fathers and their children's mothers, a number of fathers mentioned that positive changes had occurred. Some young men said they were now having fewer arguments. A young dad in Birmingham commented, 'We both try hard for the sake of my daughter'. For a young father in Newcastle the knock on effect of a more stable relationship was that his daughter, as he said:

"been removed from the protection list, because social services were involved with us but now because we've sorted ourselves out, this little 'un is more stable and happy."

Another young dad had married the mother of his new baby. He saw this as a sign of how much he'd changed, since he now wanted to be faithful to one partner, as opposed to going out deliberately looking for sex as he had described in his first interview. He had been with his wife for fourteen months, he said:

"The thought of actually being unfaithful to her has never even crossed my mind. The opportunity has arisen and if I was the same me I was before then I would have just done it and thought nothing of it."

A number of young fathers felt the project had enabled them to develop positive relationships with their 'in-laws'. For example, one father commented:

"When me and my baby mother's not talking. It's ... like her mum that's bridged the connection."

Another father said that through talking with others in his group, he had learned that not all fathers were like his own, working extremely long hours and with limited time for their children - a lesson further emphasised by watching his 'in-laws'.



Improved living arrangements

Several fathers pointed to how the project had helped them get better accommodation, which had had a positive impact not only on them but also on their children and sometimes the child's mothers. Examples include a father who was helped to make a successful application for better quality housing that made it much easier for his children to stay with him overnight, and another dad who was supported in moving with his partner from the parental home for the first time.



Personal development

A number of young fathers reported change that took them forward personally. A dad in Sheffield felt that through the project he had gained in confidence. He said:

"The project changed things, deep down, to do with confidence. That was the main thing. I think if it wasn't for the group I would have had difficulty coming to terms with becoming a father. You see other people's point of view when you go to these groups. ... You sit there, as if you were down in the dumps for ever, and then somebody says - 'Oh well, this is my problem' - you sort of sit up and - That's my problem as well. So talking to somebody else you feel a great weight lifted off your shoulders because - Oh well, if it is happening to somebody else then, I'm normal, it's not just happening to me."

Another had found his sessions with the project worker very supportive, helping him to focus on the needs of his children rather than his own needs, as he realised that putting their needs first did mean that they would not live with him:


"It's probably what got the ball rolling, he said, what got me thinking. I suppose I may never even have come to that conclusion if it hadn't have been for the worker. There's loads of other little pieces which fit in the puzzle as well, but I probably would have to say, I owe quite a bit to the worker."

Two of the young fathers in Birmingham were encouraged by their worker to return to college, achieving training that had led them into voluntary work and paid employment.

For a young dad in Norwich, the project had enabled him to take responsibility for his life, so for him finding a job had been one element in helping him to move away from crime. He had moved from being, in his words, a 'tearaway' to becoming 'controlled'.

*"I was as an alcoholic, but I don't drink any more; took a lot of responsibilities and made a lot of changes."
...young father*

Conclusions



TSA's work has shown that projects of this kind can have a positive impact on young fathers, their children and the child's mother. Starting this work is slow. It requires adequate resources, skilled workers and supportive management. There are no quick fixes or tricks to attract young men. Honesty, perseverance and responding to what the young father is asking for help about pays off in the long run. Whilst young fathers want to be treated as adults, it is important to be sensitive to the young person's stage of development, operating not only in a male-friendly way, but also in a way that recognises the youthfulness of the men involved.

*"We mustn't forget that, this whole thing is about children. The bottom line is that young men are saying that over the past two years the site worker has been able to facilitate their relationships with their children - that's it, that's gold dust."
site manager*

Further information

- ◆ This report is based on TSA's *Young Fathers Project: Evaluation Report* by Dr Enid Mordaunt. You can download the report from TSA's website, www.tsa.uk.com/reports/parenting.php

Hard copies are available for sale from TSA's publications department. Tel: 01273 693311 or via the online publications catalogue.



Related publications

Burgess A, and Bartlett D. (2004) *Working with Fathers*. Fathers Direct
A guide for workers engaged directly with families. It draws material from a wide range of sources including the TSA project sites.

Hirst, J. (2004) *The Father Figures Project Evaluation*. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University
This evaluation of the wider work of the Sheffield site includes references to the work with young fathers.

Knight, B. (2004) *A Question of Balance: Including Fathers in Services*. Newcastle: Children North-East
This review covers the work of Children North-East (including Fathers Plus) and issues related to involving fathers.

Lewis, C and Warin, J. (2001) *What good are dads?* FatherFacts 1(1). London: Fathers Direct. Available at www.fathersdirect.com
A summary of the research conducted over the last 20 years on fathers' impact on their families.

Quinton, D; Pollock, S; Golding J. (2002) *The transition to fatherhood in young men*. Brighton: Youth, Citizenship and Social Change. Also available on the ESRC database REGARD at www.regard.ac.uk
Key recent research on what influences young fathers' involvement with their children.

Rolph, J. (1999) *Young, Unemployed, Unmarried ... Fathers Talking*. London: Working with Men
Interviews with young fathers at the Mancroft Advice Project (MAP) Norwich.

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